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Atari Online News, Etc.
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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
"""""""""""""""""""""""""""""

Even with three days of on-again, off-again rain, it was a pretty good week for the weather around these parts. When we really need the rain, I usually don't complain too much; and this week was no exception. I'm actually seeing a small resurgence in my lawn - more green spots! The sad part is, however, that summer is winding down. As usual, I have no idea where the time has gone!

I've spent a lot of time recently visiting doctors, with some more medical issues. When I had my physical about a month ago, I mentioned to my primary care physician that I've been having some pain in my leg and foot, and he finally scheduled me to see a couple of specialists. I saw a neurosurgeon on Monday, and he immediately scheduled me for an MRI on my lower spine. He feels that I may have some disc problems that are affecting my leg. Had the test but won't get those results until Monday. And then I see a foot surgeon. Who knows what's going on, but I'm glad that I'm finally dealing with all of these health issues. Hopefully things won't turn out poorly; we'll see.

So, a lot of my "spare" time this week has been dealing with these issues; I don't really have anything" new" to contribute this week. However, I hope to find some more interesting "hot" topics and have some comments over the next few weeks.

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Another week has come and gone and there's nothing big going on in the Atari world. Big surprise, right?

This is going to be a short column, since there's not really a lot to talk about other than the economy being in the dumper... and you already know that, right?

Well, I DO have a humorous (sort of) story to tell you. I guess you could use a good laugh at my expense, right? Sure, why not.

As you may know, I've been looking for a job for a while now. It's rough out there, folks. I can remember the way things were back in the 1980's, high unemployment, high interest rates and, oddly enough, high confidence.

People were still going out and buying stuff, being told by the president that everything was going to be okay and that all we needed to do was to be Americans. After four years of tough times there was a new feeling... a tough-talking, likable president who had little use for anyone who wasn't like him. 'Just remember that we're the best in the world and we'll get through this' was the idea, even though foreigners were buying up New York landmarks and midwest cattle ranches by the fistful. And people bought into it. They tightened their belts and bit the bullet, spending their way out of the bad economy. And it worked... in general.

I know people who still have not recovered from those days, the days when banks were willing to give six percent interest on a savings account and 20 percent on a CD. It catch was that no one (at least not the people I knew) had the money to sock away in a savings account or CD. The ones that did made out pretty well, I guess. But the rest of us watched inflation whack us and watched our 'holdings' dwindle.

There was a lot of inflation going on in the housing industry too, with prices going up daily. People bought houses, at a slower rate, yes, but they bought them, and paid for them with variable rate mortgages. The theory was that you could get this incredibly low rate for a couple of years and then refinance to a standard mortgage before the rate went nuts on you. All was bright and sunny, and our financial gurus assured us that we'd actually make money on the deal... if everything worked out right.

Today, things are different. Banks aren't offering high interest rates on savings. Everyone knows someone who's been burnt on a variable rate mortgage, and we all know that a fixed rate is preferable now.

And the banks know that we're not going to go for the variables anymore... they're offering incredibly low rates just to get people to take out mortgages. Of course, refinancing is popular, since many people have rates at five or six percent and find that they can refinance for as low as four percent in some cases. The banks don't care because they get a fee for the refinancing, and that's money up-front, not amortized over 30 years.

It seems that everyone has learned a little something these days. That banks have learned that they don't need to offer high interest on savings, and the population has learned that they don't have to jump at every new gimmick that the banks come up with. We've also become a little more frugal with our money, which is both a good and a bad thing.

It's a good thing because using money wisely is a good thing. When my grandfather told me, "you'll never get rich by working", he didn't mean that scams and fuzzy math combined with 'best guesses' about what the economy was going to do were the way to go. He meant that investment and spending wisely were the way to go.

Of course, not everything points to us being wiser. Lots of people got hurt with variable rate mortgages this time around too. And there are many who lost their life savings with Worldcom, Enron and Bernie Madoff.

But as a whole, we've become more frugal. I said before that this was both a good and a bad thing. The "good" part is self-evident. The bad part is that it causes the economy to stagnate. People aren't spending, ie buying, so we're not producing things. If companies aren't producing things, the job situation is tight (tell me about it), and things tend to stay where they are. The government stimulus packages worked... a little... but it's hard in today's climate to convince people that the government needs to spend money when 'common sense' tells them that EVERYONE should be scrimping and saving. If we have to pinch pennies, so should they, the theory goes.

But the stimuli DID help. The problem is that we could use more of it. But there's no way, in an election year, that any politician is going to come out and propose "giving away" more billions of dollars. It just ain't gonna happen.

Of course, history tells us that that's probably what we should be doing. It's what Roosevelt did to get us out of the Great Depression. And he faced the same opposition from conservatives... They were constantly pushing to cut off government programs and give-aways.

The problem was that, every time they cut back, the economy again began to flounder. What does that tell you, friends and neighbors?

Okay, now for the story I said I was going to tell you....

About a month ago, I applied to a large corporation with outlets in malls all over the country. I'm not going to say who they are or what the sell, but it's not a clothing or department store.

I applied for a management position, knowing that I didn't have the "on-paper" experience that they were looking for, although I have done or been involved in almost every item on their "wish list".

I was quite surprised when I got a call from a manager asking me if I'd like to set up a phone interview. I jumped at the chance and made the appointment for the soonest possible date.

I had the interview with he and another manager, and it lasted for about 10 minutes longer than the 20 minutes they told me it would probably take. I took that as a good sign. It showed, I guessed, that they saw that I had the experience and drive that they were looking for and that they saw that, even though I didn't have the title associated with managing certain aspects, I did have the actual experience.

Good for me, I figured.

Well, time went by and I was starting to wonder if I'd ever hear from them. Then, a couple of days ago, I came home from running an errand and saw the "Missed Call" light flashing on the phone. There was no message on the answering machine, but the caller ID had the phone number and name of the company. My heart skipped a beat. YES! They want a second interview!

I feverishly called the number and asked for the the manager. Here is how it went...

> "Hello?"
>
> "Yes, this is Joe Mirando. I just got home and saw that you tried calling me while I was out, and I'm returning your call. I had applied

for the manager job at one of the other stores."

"Oh, you want the other manager. Just a second, I'll get him for you."

"Thank you."

[A few minutes go by]

"Hello, this is [name]. Can I help you?"

"Yes, this is Joe Mirando. I had phone interviewed for the manager job a couple of weeks ago, and just got home to find you had called me, so I'm returning your call."

"Oh, yeah Joe. Hi. Well, we're at the point in the process now where we're calling back people we've phone interviewed to bring in the ones we want to do a second interview with face to face..."

"Oh that's great!"

"Yeah, and I dialed your number by mistake."

Now ain't THAT a kick in the... well, you know.

Well, that's it for this time around, friends and neighbors. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they're saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - Best Buy Expands Game Trade-in Program!
Australian Court Stops Sales of PSJailbreak!

Halo: Reach Ending Unofficially Spoiled

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!

Australian Court Stops Sales of PSJailbreak

Last week bells were ringing in the PlayStation 3 user community of PSJailbreak, a USB dongle that claimed to enable users to copy games to

their own storage devices (including the PS3 s internal hard drive) as well as run homebrew applications for the PS3. Sony itself has been noticeably silent about PSJailbreak, but now some of their response strategy may be coming to light: an Australian court has temporarily barred the sale and distribution of PSJailbreak in that country, and ordered inventory turned over to Sony for analysis.

According to a copy of the court ruling, posted by PS3Hax, Australian citizens are barred from selling or distributing PSJailbreak; the court also ordered a limited number of the PSJailbreak devices be turned over to Sony for analysis, including destructive analysis, so long as Sony pays retail price for the devices. The court s injunction applies until August 31; Sony has until then to make its case the injunction should be continued. If the court doesn t agree, the devices could conceivable go back on sale.

The move probably marks Sony s first steps in countering PSJailbreak; the company is no doubt working on firmware or other software patches to prevent PSJailbreak from working in any jurisdiction.

The Australian ruling is interesting because, in Australia, mod chips for gaming consoles are technically legal, although the copyright infringement they enable is not. In most of Europe and the United States, the merely circumventing copy protection technology, regardless of whether any copyright violation occurs, is illegal.

Kill Your Internets, Halo: Reach Ending Unofficially Spoiled

If you don’t want to know how Halo: Reach ends, better unplug your internet box, pronto, because pirates are uploading the game’s finale.

Type ’halo reach ending’ into YouTube’s search box and up pop a couple videos the YouTube copyright police have yet to banish. One bills itself as "the highest quality REAL ending" to the game. Another claims to be from a live stream. Both were uploaded today, August 23.

I’ve had a peek at them myself, and - for reasons I can’t disclose without spoiling the ending - I can say they’re the real deal.

What motivates some to broadcast unethical behavior is anyone’s guess. Claims to "first"? Sure. And status. And this.

A group of hackers recently purloined a press review copy of the game from Microsoft’s Xbox Live Marketplace servers, bragged they’d done so but wouldn’t release it to file sharing sites, then (apparently) went ahead and released it anyway.

You know the drill - forewarned is forearmed. Watch where you surf (or pull from). Self-styled story saboteurs are probably annotating these videos and preparing to pounce on Facebook pages, blogs, Twitter feeds, and message boards even now.

Best Buy Expands Game Trade-in Program to Stores

Electronics retailer Best Buy Co. said Thursday it is offering store credit in exchange for used video games at nearly 600 of its stores, expanding an online trade-in program that has been in place for about a year.

The move follows Wednesday's announcement by Target Corp. that it is launching an electronics trade-in program at 850 of its stores later this year. Besides video games, Target will also offer store credit to customers who turn in their mobile phones and iPods.

Best Buy plans to roll out the trade-in program to the rest of its 1,089 stores by October. The company also said it will start selling used video games in its stores soon, but it provided no specifics. The current trade-in program involves customers mailing in games after filling out forms online.

GameStop Corp., the world's largest video game retailer, has long offered such trade-ins. Selling used games is a big part of its business, and it has helped the retailer appeal to budget-conscious gamers in the recession.

Wal-Mart Stores Inc. and Amazon.com Inc. also offer video game trade-ins.

Different video games will fetch different prices, depending on their popularity and other factors. The best-selling "Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2," for example, will get you $13 to $17, according to Best Buy's online trade-in calculator. Buying the same game, also used, on Best Buy's website will cost you $35. A new game goes for $60.

Shares of Best Buy, which is based in Minneapolis, slid 53 cents to $31.95 in afternoon trading Thursday. GameStop investors seemed to shrug off the competition. The company's shares fell 18 cents to $18.24 amid a broader market decline.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Pentagon Computers Attacked with Flash Drive

A foreign spy agency pulled off the most serious breach of Pentagon computer networks ever by inserting a flash drive into a U.S. military laptop, a top defense official said Wednesday.

The previously classified incident, which took place in 2008 in the Middle East, was disclosed in a magazine article by Deputy Defense Secretary William J. Lynn and released by the Pentagon Wednesday.

He said a "malicious code" on the flash drive spread undetected on both classified and unclassified Pentagon systems, "establishing what amounted to a digital beachhead, from which data could be transferred to servers under foreign control."

"It was a network administrator’s worst fear: a rogue program operating silently, poised to deliver operational plans into the hands of an unknown adversary," Lynn wrote in an article for Foreign Affairs. "This ... was the most significant breach of U.S. military computers ever and it served as an important wake-up call."

The Pentagon operation to counter the attack, known as Operation Buckshot Yankee, marked a turning point in U.S. cyberdefense strategy, Lynn said.

In November 2008, the Defense Department banned the use of the small high-tech storage devices that are used to move data from one computer to another. The ban was partially lifted early this year with the approval of limited use of the devices.

Lynn did not disclose what, if any, military secrets may have been stolen in the 2008 penetration of the system, what nation orchestrated the attack, nor whether there were any other repercussions.

The article went on to warn that U.S. adversaries can threaten American military might without building stealth fighters, aircraft carriers or other expensive weapons systems.

"A dozen determined computer programmers can, if they find a vulnerability to exploit, threaten the United States’ global logistics network, steal its operational plans, blind its intelligence capabilities, or hinder its ability to deliver weapons on target," Lynn wrote.

"Knowing this, many militaries are developing offensive capabilities in cyberspace, and more than 100 foreign intelligence organizations are trying to break into U.S. networks," he said.

Defense officials have said repeatedly that the military system of some 15,000 computer networks and seven million computers suffers millions of probes a day with threats coming from a range of attackers from routine hackers to foreign governments looking to steal sensitive information or bring down critical, life-sustaining systems.

Worried About ID Theft? Join the Club

Nearly two-thirds of Americans are concerned that information about their bank accounts, credit cards and identity may be stolen from their computers, to a survey released today by a provider of identity theft protection services.

When asked to identify their top computer security concerns, 65 percent of the survey’s respondents said their top fear was having bank account, credit card, or other personal information stolen from their computers.

The second biggest worry for consumers is phishing or other attacks trying to steal personal information from them (34 percent), followed by malware that makes a computer an unknowing accomplice in distributing spam, infections or child pornography to other computers and users (29 percent) and having their computer’s performance compromised by viruses (25 percent). (Click on the thumbnail images below to see the charts.)

Kindsight also found that a staggering 81 percent of the people participating in the poll had been infected by a computer virus at some time in their computing lives and that 29 percent of them had been victimized in the last three months. Despite their experiences with malware, many consumers still have sloppy security practices, the surveyors found. For instance, only 59 percent of the survey's respondents had updated their antivirus software and only 53 percent had enabled a firewall on their home router or computer.

"The results of our survey shed light on the public's concerns toward ID theft and online protection," Kindsight CEO Mike Gassewitz says in a statement. "In recent years, online hackers have advanced to a new class of sophisticated cyber criminals. Methodical in planning their attacks to make them more lucrative, these criminals are skilled at identifying potential security holes in a consumer's home network."

"Armed with consumers' personal information, these cyber criminals can deplete bank accounts and harm credit ratings, which costs consumers significant time and effort to reverse the damage," he adds.

The survey sample consisted of 1200 web users from 18 to 55 years old with at least one personal computer in their homes and a broadband connection, and who spend a few hours a month browsing the Internet from their domicile.

Rustock Botnet Responsible for 40 Percent of Spam

More than 40 percent of the world's spam is coming from a single network of computers that computer security experts continue to battle, according to new statistics from Symantec's MessageLabs' division.

The Rustock botnet has shrunk since April, when about 2.5 million computers were infected with its malicious software that sent about 43 billion spam e-mails per day. Much of it is pharmaceutical spam.

Now, about 1.3 million computers are infected with Rustock, and the botnet is making up for its decreased size with increased volume, said Paul Wood, a MessageLabs intelligence analyst with Symantec. Those infected computers -- most of which are in North America and Western Europe -- are collectively sending around 46 billion spam e-mails per day.

The reason for the drop in infected computers could be due to a number of factors, Wood said. Those computers' antivirus programs may have detected the infections or the people controlling Rustock could have lost the connection to those computers for various reasons.

The computers infected with Rustock have also stopped using TLS (Transport Layer Security), an encryption protocol used to securely send e-mail. Spammers were believed to encrypt their spam using TLS because it was harder for other network equipment to inspect the traffic and figure out if it was spam, Wood said.

But sending e-mail using TLS required more resources and was slower. "It would seem that the botnet controllers, especially those behind Rustock, have perhaps realized that the use of TLS gave them little or no discernible benefits and instead impeded their sending capacity owing to

the additional bandwidth and processing overhead needed for TLS," the report said.

Rustock has proved to be a robust botnet. It was nearly killed off when McColo, an ISP in San Jose, California, was cut off from the Internet in November 2008 by its upstream providers. McColo had hosted the command-and-control servers for several botnets, including Rustock.

But Rustock's operators were able to switch the command-and-control servers when McColo briefly regained connectivity again before finally being shut off, which has allowed it to run for nearly four years now.

The Anti-Facebook Arrives September 15: Will You Switch?

Diaspora, the open source social network and potential Facebook challenger, will be ready to launch on September 15, according to the project's developers.

In a recent blog post, the Diaspora team say they have the nascent social networking software up and running, and are happy with the near-final result. Despite these proclamations, however, it's unclear what Diaspora will look like or how it will function when Diaspora finally launches.

Diaspora is meant to be an alternative to Facebook, Twitter, and other social networks allowing you to share content such as photos, status updates, links, and so on. The plan for implementing Diaspora, as I understand it, is for users to download the software package, and then install it on their own Website hosted by yourself or a Web hosting service like Go Daddy.

For those not interested in hosting their own Diaspora site, the team also plans on creating a one-click sign-up version of Diaspora as well. But it's not clear when a hosted version of Diaspora would become available. However, the real power behind Diaspora appears to be the ability to take control of all your social networking data and put it on a server that you control.

At launch, Diaspora will likely be fairly basic. Key features, according to the project Website, include the ability to scrape your data from major social networks such as Faceb ook, Twitter, and Flickr; and for Diaspora users to connect with each other and share content such as status updates and photos between different Websites. Diaspora is also supposed to include end-to-end GNU Privacy Guard (GPG) encryption to make sure everything you share with your friends is protected while it's being sent across the Internet from one site to another.

Plans for Diaspora after its initial launch include Open ID integration, Voice over Internet Protocol services, and instant messaging. The team also plans to make Diaspora extensible so that developers can write plug-ins for it, which I assume would be similar to using Wordpress plug-ins.

Diaspora was born amid the controversy surrounding Facebook's privacy controls and sharing features such as Instant Personalization. The project was initiated by four New York University students, and was originally conceived as a summer project. After a swarm of media attention, however, and $200,00 of funding raised through Kickstarter, Diaspora appears to be

taking on a life of its own. At least two members of the Diaspora team will not resume their studies in the fall to focus instead on Diaspora's long-term ambitions.

But questions still remain about whether Diaspora would ever be able to come close to challenging Facebook and its growing base of 500 million users. Then again, perhaps the point of Diaspora is not to compete with Facebook for number of users. Instead, Diaspora is simply an open alternative for those looking for a social networking solution without the hassle of constantly managing your privacy settings.

Apple UI Patent Prompts Speculation of an iMac Touch

A European patent filed by Apple in January suggests that the company is thinking about an iMac-like touchscreen computer that could shift between touch and stylus input.

The patent, discovered by Patently Apple, only describes the possibility of shifting between two input modes. However, the site speculated that the patent could augur an iPad-like device that might move between a Mac OS and the iPad's iOS at a gesture or other user input.

The patent cited by the site does not mention operating systems, however.

"Transitioning between a high-resolution input mode, such as a mouse-based interface, and a low-resolution input mode, such as a touch-based interface, is described," the patent abstract reads. "A change of orientation of a touch screen between a first orientation and a second orientation is detected. Transitioning between the two input modes and corresponding user interfaces (UIs) is based on the detected change of orientation. A change of orientation can be detected with one or more sensors, such as an accelerometer, position sensors, etc. Transitioning from one mode to another can include modifying an item displayed in the UI of the one mode into a corresponding item displayed in the UI of the other mode. The modifying can include enlarging/reducing, obscuring/unobscuring, moving, etc. For example, an item can be obscured by the visual effect of sliding it off of the screen."

Based on past history, Apple is expected to refresh the iPod touch this fall, possibly in September. Reports have suggested that the touch will gain the iPhone 4's so-called "retina screen" and a front-facing camera that it could use for Apple's FaceTime app.

The patent suggests that Apple might use the orientation of the screen and its location to determine whether the user wishes to use the device as a tablet, in touch mode, or as a desktop display, requiring a mouse and keyboard.

"The foregoing can be addressed by providing transitioning between modes of input, for example, transitioning between touch-based input and mouse/keyboard-based input, by sensing a change in the orientation of a touch screen display," the patent reads. "The change in the orientation of the display can be detected by one or more sensors. For example, an accelerometer in the display can sense the force of gravity along an axis, and the measured force can be used to determine an angle of the display with respect to the ground (i.e., the plane perpendicular to the direction of the force of gravity)."

The patent also suggests that as a user switches between a high-resolution mouse and keyboard mode and a coarser, touch-based UI, icons able to be seen on the higher-resolution display might be "lot" off screen. In this case, the patent claims that an Apple UI might be "slid" or otherwise manipulated to allow the user to grab the icons and retrieve them back to the home screen.

Home Wi-Fi Important for School Success

A Cisco-sponsored study released Thursday found that both teens and parents value connectivity when its comes to education.

According to a new study by the Opinion Research group; 9 out of 10 teens aged 12 to 17, and nearly 3 out of 4 parents, feel having home Wi-Fi access makes students better equipped to handle schoolwork.

While the results of the Home Learning survey, conducted this month for Cisco’s Consumer Products group, shows that parents and teenagers are in agreement on the importance of home Wi-Fi, they differ as to why. Teens surveyed felt that students with a home wireless connection have an easier time completing their school assignments because they have better "anywhere, anytime" access to the Internet. Parents, rather, felt that having home Wi-Fi makes students better prepared to complete what is required and assigned for them by their teachers and school.

The survey also reveals how strongly parents are concerned about their teens’ Internet usage. Ninety percent of parents polled say that teens need to be monitored to ensure they are using the Internet to access appropriate sites and acceptable times of the day.

Other results show that teens enjoy the mobility and flexibility that wireless provides. Sixty-one percent felt that students with home wireless would study outside of their room or home often or very often. Sixty-one percent also said teens with home wireless were more likely to have a classmate over for group studying.

Software Router Smashes Speed Records

Researchers in South Korea have built a networking router that transmits data at record speeds from components found in most high-end desktop computers. A team from the Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology created the router, which transmits data at nearly 40 gigabits per second - many times faster than the previous record for such a device.

The techniques used by the researchers could lead to a number of breakthroughs, including the use of cheaper commodity chips, such as those made by Intel and Nvidia, in high-performance routers, in place of custom-made hardware. The software developed by the researchers could also serve as a testbed for novel networking protocols that might eventually replace the decades-old ones on which the Internet currently runs.

Most routers use custom hardware to route data as it passes between computer networks. Software routers perform the same tasks using commodity hardware - by mimicking the behavior of a hardware router in software. Commercial software routers from companies such as Vyatta <http://www.vyatta.com/> can typically only attain transfer data at speeds of up to three gigabits per second. That isn't fast enough to take advantage of the full speed of a typical network card, which operates at 10 gigabits per second.

"We started with the humble goal of being the first to get a PC router to 10 [gigabits per second], but we pushed it to 40," says Sue Moon, leader of the lab in which the research was conducted. Her students Sangjin Han and Keon Jang developed software called PacketShader that made this possible. PacketShader uses a computer's graphics processing unit (GPU) to help process packets of data sent across a network.

Modern routers are rarely dumb switches anymore. They are often called upon to manipulate packets in a number of different ways as they pass through. GPUs are ideal for this purpose because they can process data in parallel, which means they can handle several packets of data at once. According to Moon, a GPU is much faster at handling some packet-processing tasks, such as authenticating or encrypting all of the packets in a stream. When the GPU takes over these tasks, it gives the central processing unit (CPU) breathing room to handle other things that are more serial in nature, such processing several packets in turn to detect attempts to break into a network.

Mark Handley, a professor of networked systems at University College London, points out that for basic packet forwarding, which isn't likely to overwhelm a computer's CPU, there is no advantage to strapping the GPU onto the system. However, he agrees that the GPU is very well suited to encrypting or authenticating packets.

Gianluca Iannaccone, an engineer at Intel Labs Berkeley who is familiar with PacketShader, says it could slash the number of physical machine needed to comprise a terabit-per-second software router to one-third of what his research has previously indicated would be required.

"One terabit is the entry point for enterprise-grade routers - the routers in the core of the Internet," says Iannaccone. His work on a system called RouteBricks points to a future in which routers aren't the specialized hardware they are now, but instead function as software running on pools of servers. Lash enough software routers together that run at 40 gigabits per second, and you get what is essentially a single-terabit router. Using such a system, routers might some day run completely in software.

"We can expect killer apps out of this," says KyoungSoo Park, another professor at the Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology who was involved with the project. "You can build an interesting packet- or network-management system on top of a PC-based software router that can't be implemented with a hardware router. Ultimately, you can experiment with new protocols that are not used in today's Internet."

Bloggers Crying Foul over Philly Business Tax

Bloggers in Philadelphia are upset over a city business fee that they say

is an unfair tax on their Internet musings.

The city’s so-called business privilege license costs $50 a year or $300 for a lifetime.

If a blog takes money for advertising, or sells photographs or other goods, it’s a business and must pay for a license - no matter how little it makes - plus taxes on profits.

A spokesman for Mayor Michael Nutter says the license is nothing new and is required for any moneymaking enterprise, from large corporations to neighborhood pizza joints and all other kinds of mom-and-pop businesses.

But the idea of the city mandating a license for people who blog in their spare time and garner some income, no matter how minuscule, rankled the blogosphere, though it was clear there is a distinction that some bloggers are pros, while others are just hobbyists.

"It’s also something the city of Philadelphia has been doing to freelance writers for a certain amount of time," Joey Sweeney, publisher and editor of the websites Philebrity.com and phoodie.info, told The Associated Press on Monday. "We had to get a business privilege license a few years ago. I guess my take on it is if you are somebody who blogs as hobby obviously you shouldn’t have to open an account with the city or whatever."

"I think that a lot of people don’t really take the decision to run advertising on their blogs very seriously or as seriously as you should," he said. "When you do that you make a decision essentially to go into business. It might be a really small business, it might be a side thing, but basically the second you accept advertising you’re playing a different game than someone who has a Tumblr or posts on Facebook."

City spokesman Doug Oliver told The Associated Press that for people who blog strictly for fun, not profit, the license requirement doesn’t apply.

The uproar began after the city Revenue Department recently sent out letters to Philadelphia residents who reported business revenue with the Internal Revenue Service but hadn’t gotten a city business license.

Some bloggers are complaining that the fee would impinge on their free speech and would discourage dissent. They also say it’s unfair to require business to taxes if they’re making only $25 or $50 a year.

The blog Uncoverage.net, which is based in San Francisco, called the fee "absolutely ridiculous."

"Philadelphia decided to pick on bloggers," stated a post on the blog Monday. "They will, of course, lose any legal challenge in court, but they’ll go ahead with the idea anyway because that’s what fools do - act without thinking."

Two City Council members have proposed legislation that would change some of the requirements for all small businesses, including bloggers. If approved, the proposal would still require them to pay for a business privilege license but they wouldn’t be required to pay taxes on the first $100,000 in profit.

That’s not sitting well with some bloggers.

"I think it’s ludicrous," said Seano Barry, whose blog Circle of Fits focuses on music in Philadelphia and offers up concert and music reviews.

"I review shows in the city. I sometimes write for a couple of other blogs," he told The AP. "Sometimes I get access to the shows, sometimes I don’t. To put the ads up is to cover the cost of going downtown."

In the last two years, Barry said he’s made about $11 and change from the tiny ads on his site, nothing else.

"This is not a business," he said. "Really, it’s a labor of love."

Malicious Spam Exploits Fake Celebrity Deaths

Miley Cyrus is fine. BeyoncØ did not perish in a plane crash. Brad Pitt did not meet an untimely demise. Everyone take a deep breath and - whatever you do - do NOT click on any file or link that arrives as a part of a sensational e-mail declaring a celebrity death.

A Symantec spokesperson reported via e-mail that Symantec is "currently tracking an eruption on the spam ring of stories of celebrities dying in plane crashes or car accidents." The strategy of exploiting hyperbolic news headlines - whether fiction or reality - is part of the standard malware playbook. Gullible users continue to fall for the oldest spam trick in the book, though, which is why it is still used so frequently.

If the spam arrives anything like these attacks hit my wife’s computer, a user would have to be a whole new level of gullible to fall prey. Receiving an e-mail claiming that Tom Cruise is dead might be inviting, but when your inbox is inundated with ten or fifteen messages in a row - each with essentially the same subject line declaring various celebrities dead - it should be a glaring signal that something isn’t right.

The content of the e-mail is also a strong indication that the message is a malicious spam attack for all but the most naïve users. One message my wife received, with the subject line "Miley Cyrus died", reads "Alicia Keys died along with 34 other people when the Air Force CT-43 "Bobcat" passenger plane carrying the group on a trip crashed into a mountainside while approaching the Dubrovnik airport in Croatia during heavy rain and poor visibility."

I don’t expect everyone to know the history of military aircraft crashes off the top of their head, but this spam attack is actually distorting a true life crash in an attempt to lend an air of credibility to the report. A US Air Force CT-43 (a modified Boeing 737) did, in fact, crash in inclement weather on approach to Dubrovnik airport in Croatia. However, the real crash occurred in April of 1996 and killed US Secretary of Commerce Ron Brown and 34 other passengers - not Jay-Z or Jennifer Aniston.

Even without knowing that bit of airplane tragedy trivia, though, the fact that the subject line mentions Miley Cyrus, but the message content starts off with Alicia Keys is a tip-off that perhaps the e-mail is not legitimate. If you get past that point, you have to wonder what Miley Cyrus (or Alicia Keys...or both) were doing on an Air Force transport plane flying into Croatia.

If gullible or naïve users fall for the bait and click on the file attachment, there is a good chance the computer will be compromised with malware. A Symantec Security Response blog post explains that "Upon opening the zipped attachment named "[REMOVED] Hot News.zip," we find an executable. The malicious content is detected as Trojan.Zbot by Symantec antivirus products."

Once again, this malicious spam campaign demonstrates why IT admins need to make sure users have security awareness training. Most of computer security boils down to being informed and exercising common sense. No amount of security tools or antimalware defenses can make up for ignorance or user error.

Google Fixes Gmail Bug That Turned Email into Spam

Google has fixed an issue with Gmail that caused a small percentage of its accounts to repeatedly send email messages over and over.

The bug, which affected less than 2.5 percent of the Gmail userbase, according to Google, involved odd behavior including the repeated messages. The bug was resolved Thursday night, according to Google's Google Apps dashboard.

"The problem with Google Mail should be resolved," Google's tech support staff wrote. "We apologize for the inconvenience and thank you for your patience and continued support. Please rest assured that system reliability is a top priority at Google, and we are making continuous improvements to make our systems better."

The bug affected at least two writers for PCMag.com, who initially dismissed thoughts of a bug, suspecting that their PCs may have become infected with malware. The repeated messages also resulted in several Gmail users being added to spam lists, including www.Backscatterer.org and www.SORBS.net, according to WgtnDan, a user who posted to the Google Gmail support thread describing the problem.

MrEvan, a poster described as a Google employee, also added his own apologies. "Thank you again for the patience you have shown, and sincerest apologies for the inconvenience this has caused you," he wrote. "I too have friends and professional contacts and absolutely understand the value of those relationships and how it could be very frustrating to have bothered some of those folks unintentionally. While I can't take the messages back with some sort of magical Undo Send, I totally sympathize with your situation. Please understand that the Gmail Team has worked tirelessly to investigate this issue and get it solved for you. Your reports were very helpful in our investigation."

At a press conference announcing the integration of Google Voice and Gmail this week, Google executives were asked about the number of Gmail users. Executives declined to provide an exact number, although comScore numbers cited by /The Wall Street Journal/ put the number at over 160 million, putting the maximum number of users affected by the bug at about 4 million users.

Malware Implicated in Fatal Spanair Plane Crash

Authorities investigating the 2008 crash of Spanair flight 5022 have discovered a central computer system used to monitor technical problems in the aircraft was infected with malware.

An internal report issued by the airline revealed the infected computer failed to detect three technical problems with the aircraft, which if detected, may have prevented the plane from taking off, according to reports in the Spanish newspaper, El Pais.

Flight 5022 crashed just after takeoff from Madrid-Barajas International Airport two years ago today, killing 154 and leaving only 18 survivors.

The U.S. National Transportation Safety Board reported in a preliminary investigation that the plane had taken off with its flaps and slats retracted - and that no audible alarm had been heard to warn of this because the systems delivering power to the take-off warning system failed. Two earlier events had not been reported by the automated system.

The malware on the Spanair computer has been identified as a type of Trojan horse. It could have entered the airline’s system in a number of ways, according to Jamz Yaneeza, head threat researcher at Trend Micro.

Some of the most likely ways are through third party devices such as USB sticks, Yaneeza said, which were responsible for the International Space Station virus infection in 2008, or through a remote VPN connection that may not have the same protection as a computer within the enterprise network. Opening just one malicious file on a single computer is all it takes to infect an entire system.

"Any computer that is connected to a network is vulnerable to a malware infection," O. Sami Saydjari, president of Cyber Defense Agency, told TechNewsDaily. "Standards have not been set to protect critical infrastructure."

An incident like this could happen again, and most likely will, according to Saydjari.

A judge has ordered Spanair to provide all of the computer’s logs from the days before and after the crash.The final report from crash investigators is not due to be presented until December.

Australian Police, Facebook Crack Child Porn Ring

An international child pornography ring that operated on Facebook has been brought down with the social networking site’s support, Australian police said Friday.

Eleven people have been charged in Australia, Britain and Canada in connection with the syndicate, which involved people using Facebook to distribute and view graphic sexual images, police said.

The Sydney Morning Herald newspaper reported Friday that Facebook management knew about the pornography on its website and had deactivated accounts of people involved, but had not informed police.

Facebook and Australian Federal Police issued a joint statement in response to the report saying the networking site had immediately taken action once a police investigation began, and its assistance was "integral to bringing down this international child pornography syndicate."

The statement acknowledged the difficulty Facebook had in stopping the syndicate, as users would set up false new accounts after their accounts were deactivated.

"Policing in this social networking environment is a challenge, but the cooperation during this operation demonstrates that international law enforcement is united in a global fight against online child exploitation material," the statement said. "It is important that content service providers including Facebook constantly scan for child exploitation material, and then inform law enforcement of their findings."

Australian police said they began investigating the case in March after a covert agent established an online identity on Facebook and was approached by a member of the child pornography ring.

By June, the investigation included police in the United States, Canada, Britain, Germany, South Africa and Switzerland, police said. The investigation is continuing, they said.

Facebook has no staff in Australia. Joe Sullivan, Facebook's chief security officer, said a member of his team would visit Australia in September for meetings with police and child safety advocates.

He said Facebook and the Australian police were working on protocols to ensure that illegal activity would be reported more rapidly to police.

Reach Older Users on Facebook and Twitter

A new study from the Pew Internet and American Life Project shows that social networking is maturing - or at least its audience is. As Baby Boomers flock to Facebook and other social networking sites, it shifts the marketing demographics and makes social networking an even more critical forum for engaging consumers.

Overview for the report by Senior Research Specialist Mary Madden, titled "Older Adults and Social Media," points out, "While social media use has grown dramatically across all age groups, older users have been especially enthusiastic over the past year about embracing new networking tools."

Social networking use has risen in general, but the sharpest increase was among the over-50 population which almost doubled from 22 percent to 42 percent.

Madden's report finds, "While social media use has grown dramatically across all age groups, older users have been especially enthusiastic over the past year about embracing new networking tools. Although e-mail continues to be the primary way that older users maintain contact with friends, families and colleagues, many users now rely on social network platforms to help manage their daily communications - sharing links, photos, videos, news and status updates with a growing network of contacts."

What does this mean from a business perspective? Social networking as a means of marketing to potential customers, and engaging loyal customers is more critical than ever. Baby Boomers represent a large, and relatively wealthy segment of the population - holding a large percentage of the discretionary disposable income in the United States.

Charles Orlando, author of "The Problem with Women...is Men", has an extensive marketing background and has established a thriving presence on Facebook. Based on his experience building a community on Facebook, he believes its important to approach it as social engagement rather than social media.

Orlando told me, "I've been in the trenches with my book's Fan Page for the last year...and much of what I've accomplished has to do with three clear things: tone/voice, relevant and valuable content, and non-'salesy' engagement."

Based on those principles, Orlando was able to grow the following of his Facebook Page, from 300 in March of this year to over 59,000 today. More important than the sheer number of Facebook members that have "Liked" his page, Orlando reports that 97 percent of those 59,000 users are from his target audience (women), and that nearly half of them actively engage in the site and participate in the community.

Orlando stressed, "This was accomplished with pure word of mouth. Not a dime has gone into an online advertising." He attributes the skyrocketing growth to his approach to engaging the audience rather than simply marketing to them.

If you use Facebook or Twitter as a medium for blasting out marketing messages, your audience will read them and move on. But, if you engage the audience with questions and provide meaningful discussion, those interactions are generally displayed on the member's feed as well - providing an opportunity for the extended social network to be drawn in and join the community as well.

The Pew Internet and American Life Project report shows that the social networking audience is maturing as social networking itself matures. Businesses need to embrace it as social engagement rather than social media, and take advantage of the platform to reach consumers.

PC Industry's Woes Could Mean Bargains This Fall

If you're looking for bargains on personal computers, bad news from the industry could be good for your pocketbook.

Computer makers are scrambling for ways to goose faltering consumer demand after a weak start to the back-to-school shopping season. That could mean deeper price cuts and other promotions beyond the incentives that the industry dangled in front of shoppers to lure them into stores during the worst of the recession.

The latest sign of trouble came Friday when Intel Corp. lowered its forecast for the third quarter, saying demand for consumer PCs has been weaker than expected.

Because Intel's microprocessors are used in 80 percent of the world's PCs, its forecast essentially speaks for the health of the entire PC industry. Plus, its orders are based on how many computers the world's biggest PC makers expect to make in the coming months, so weak chip sales now could foreshadow weak results to come from those manufacturers.

Even before Intel announced the latest trouble, two leading PC makers - Hewlett-Packard Co. and Dell Inc. - raised red flags last week about what is normally a robust season for sales.

Dell's chief financial officer, Brian Gladden, called the back-to-school shopping season "a little weaker than we would have expected." Todd Bradley, head of HP's PC division, complained of "softness" in consumer laptops and a late start in back-to-school shopping.

Barclays Capital analyst Ben Reitzes said another factor could cause PC makers to cut prices: In the past few months, the prices for parts such as hard disk drives and memory have fallen - to their lowest levels of the year in August. That gives PC makers the freedom to lower prices while maintaining healthy profit margins.

"This component environment could potentially now allow companies to invest in more aggressive pricing to stimulate demand into next year," he wrote in a research note Friday.

Intel said it now expects revenue of $10.8 billion to $11.2 billion for the fiscal third quarter, which ends in September. That compares with a previous forecast of $11.2 billion to $12 billion. On average, analysts surveyed by Thomson Reuters had expected $11.5 billion.

Three-quarters of Intel's revenue comes from its chips and other technologies for PCs. The forecast cut means that PC makers suddenly scaled back or canceled their orders with Intel during the quarter, reflecting the lower demand they're bracing for in the coming months.

PCs already have low profit margins, and the recession squeezed them further by forcing price cuts to entice shoppers. The strategy worked, but dipping demand could mean that prices will fall even more.

Reitzes said the computer maker with the biggest potential for revenue growth in this market is Apple Inc., whose iPad is seen eating into laptop sales. PC makers such as HP, Dell and others, he said, face a different question in needing to balance aggressive pricing with generating profits.

Consumer spending on discounted computers was instrumental in helping buoy the industry over the past two years, while businesses cut way back.

That trend is now reversing.

Consumers aren't spending on technology as freely as they were. Uncertainty about jobs is keeping their spending in check.

Meanwhile, businesses have freed their budgets a bit. It's not necessarily because they're more sanguine about their prospects. Upgrading technology makes financial sense: Maintaining old machines can be more expensive than buying new ones with more features.

But there are signs business spending is rocky as well.

John Chambers, CEO of Cisco Systems Inc., the world's largest maker of computer networking gear and another important barometer of technology spending, said in early August that the company was seeing signs that the global economic recovery is slowing down. He said Cisco is getting "a large number of mixed signals" from customers about their spending plans.

Intel's warning comes a month after the company reported its biggest quarterly profit in a decade.

But those results were fueled by a rebound in technology spending at corporations, many of which held off replacing older computers during the recession.

Intel's downgrade to its guidance wasn't entirely a surprise. Many investors simply didn't believe that Intel would be able to hit the higher numbers because of signals from other PC-industry suppliers that PC sales were collapsing.

Those fears were the main reason why Intel's stock has fallen about 13 percent since Intel issued its original guidance on July 13. The fall erased about $16 billion in shareholder wealth through Thursday's close.

After the company released its revised outlook, the company's shares rose 19 cents, or 1 percent, to close Friday at $18.37, amid a general lift on Wall Street.

Analyst Craig Berger with FBR Capital Markets said that PCs might be "just the first shoe to drop," and that troubles could spread to other chip-makers, such as those that focus on communications, industrial and automotive sectors. He added that Intel's main rival, Advanced Micro Devices Inc., is also likely being hurt.

Intel is scheduled to report results on Oct. 12 and plans to update its fourth-quarter and full-year outlook then.

The company has benefited from a recovering PC market for about a year and half. In April 2009, Intel CEO Paul Otellini proclaimed that PC sales "bottomed out" and had started recovering - a forecast that even the major PC makers wouldn't immediately get behind, but proved to be true.

Now, it appears the market is starting to dip again.

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